# MEMOIR

ON THE

# ANTIQUITIES

OF THE

## Western Parts of the State of New-York.

READ BEFORE

THE LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF NEW-YORK.

BY DE WITT CLINTON,
*President of the said Society.*

*ALBANY:*

PRINTED BY E. & E. HOSFORD, 100, STATE-STREET.

.....

1820.

TARRYTOWN, NEW YORK
REPRINTED
WILLIAM ABBATT
1916
Being Extra Number 46 of THE MAGAZINE OF HISTORY WITH NOTES AND QUERIES

As the progress of cultivation extinguishes the remains of Antiquities mentioned in this Memoir, the view of the writer, in publishing it, is to awaken enquiry to a subject of great importance, before the means of investigation are entirely lost.

# A MEMOIR

**On the Antiquities of the Western parts of the State of New York, addressed to the Honourable Samuel L. Mitchill, a Vice-President of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York, Professor of Natural History in the University of the State, etc., etc.**

SIR:

BACON describes antiquities [as] history defaced, or some remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time, *tanquam tabula naufragii*, when industrious persons, by exact and scrupulous diligence and observation, out of monuments, names, words, proverbs, traditions, private records and evidences, fragments of stories, passages of books that concern not story, and the like, do save and recover somewhat from the deluge of time. The antiquities of our country have always appeared to me more important and to deserve more attention than they have heretofore received. We have indeed no written authorities or documents to recur to, except the ancient French and Dutch writers; and it is well known that their attention was almost solely absorbed in the pursuit of wealth or in the propagation of religion, and that their sentiments were shaped by reigning prejudices, regulated by preconceived theories, controlled by the policy of their sovereigns, and obscured by the darkness which then covered the world.

To rely entirely on the traditions of the Aborigines for authentic and extensive information, is to lean on a broken reed. Those who have interrogated them must know that they were generally as ignorant as the inquirer; that the ideas they communicated were either invented at the moment or were so connected with palpable fable as to be almost entirely unworthy of credit. Having no written auxiliaries to memory, the facts with which they were acquainted became, in process of time, obliterated from the mind or distorted by new impressions and new traditions. If in the

course of thirty years the Buccaneers of St. Domingo lost almost every trace of Christianity, what confidence can we repose in the oral history delivered to us by savages without the use of letters, and continually engrossed in war or in the chase? The field of enquiry is then limited in its range, but happily it is not entirely closed against us. The monuments which remain afford considerable room for investigation. The languages, the persons and the customs of the red men may be made use of to illustrate their origin and history; and even the geology of the country may, in some cases, be successfully applied to shed light on the subjects of inquiry.

Having had some opportunities for personal observation and not a few for inquiry, I am induced to believe that the Western parts of the United States were, prior to their discovery and occupation by Europeans, inhabited by numerous nations in a settled state and much further advanced in civilization than the present tribes of Indians. Perhaps it is not too much to say that they did not fall far short of the Mexicans and Peruvians when first visited by the Spaniards. In my illustrations of this subject I shall principally confine myself to this State, occasionally glancing beyond it, and avoiding as far as possible, topics which have been heretofore discussed.

The town of Pompey, in the county of Onondaga, is the highest ground of that country,* and divides the waters which flow into the bay of Chesapeake and the Gulph of St. Lawrence. The most elevated parts of the town exhibit the remains of ancient settlements, and in various other parts of it, the vestiges of a numerous population appear. About two miles south from Manlius Square, and in the town of Pompey, I examined the remains of a large town, which were obviously indicated by large spots of black mould in regular intervals of a few paces distant,† in which I observed bones of animals, ashes, carbonized beans or grains of Indian

*Or rather *County*.
†Distance.

corn, denoting the residence of human beings. This town must have extended at least half a mile from east to west, and three-quarters of a mile from north to south. This extent I could determine with considerable accuracy from my own view, but I was assured by a gentleman of veracity that its length from East to west was one mile. A town covering upwards of five hundred acres must have contained a population greatly transcending all our ideas of credibility. A mile to the east of the settlement there is a burying-ground containing three or four acres, and close to the west end there is another. This town was on elevated ground, about twelve miles distant from the Salt Springs on Onondaga, and was well calculated for defence. On the east side there is a perpendicular descent of one hundred feet into a deep ravine, through which a fine stream flows, and on the north side a similar one. There are three old forts situate distant about eight miles from each other, and forming a triangle which encloses the town; one a mile south of the present village of Jamesville, and the other north-east and south-east in Pompey; and they were, in all probability, erected to cover the town and to protect the inhabitants against the attacks of an enemy. All these forts are of a circular or elliptical form; there are bones scattered all over the ground; an ash tree growing on it was cut down, and the concentric circles showed it to be ninety-three years old. On a heap of mouldered ashes, composing the site of a large house, I saw a white pine tree, eight and a half feet in circumference and at least one hundred and thirty years old. On the line of the north side the town was probably stormed. There are graves on each side close to the precipice; sometimes five or six persons were thrown promiscuously into the same grave. If the invaders had been repulsed, the inhabitants would have interred the killed in the usual places; but from the circumstance of there being graves near the ravine and in the village, I am induced to believe that the town was taken. On the south side of this ravine a gun-barrel, several

bullets, a piece of lead, and a skull perforated by a bullet, were discovered. Indeed, gun-barrels, axes, hoes and swords were found all over these grounds, and I procured the following articles, which I now transmit to the Society to be deposited in their collection: two mutilated gun-barrels, two axes, a hoe, a bell without a clapper, a piece of a large bell, a finger-ring, a sword blade, pieces of bayonets, gunlocks and earthenware, a pipe, door-latch, beads and several other small things. These demonstrate European intercourse, and from the attempts which were evidently made to render the gun-barrels useless by filing them, there can be little doubt but that the Europeans who had settled here were defeated and driven from the country by the Indians.

Near the remains of this town I observed a large forest, which was in former times cleared and under cultivation; and I drew this inference from the following circumstances: There were no hillocks or small mounds which are always the result of uprooted trees; no uprooted or decaying trees or stumps, no underwood, and the trees were generally fifty or sixty years old. Many, very many, years must elapse before a cultivated country is covered with wood. The seeds must be slowly conveyed by winds and birds. The town of Pompey abounds with forests of a similar character; some are four miles long and two wide, and it contains a great number of ancient places of interment. I have heard them estimated at eighty. If the present white population of that county were entirely swept away, perhaps in the revolution of ages similar appearances would exist.

It appears to me that there are two distinct eras in our antiquities; one applicable to the remains of old fortifications and settlements which existed anterior to European intercourse, and the other referring to European establishments and operations; and as the whites as well as the Indians would frequently resort to the former for protection, habitation or hunting, they must

necessarily contain many articles of European manufacture, and thereby great confusion has resulted by blending together distant eras greatly remote in point of time.

The French had, undoubtedly large establishments in the territory of the Six Nations. A quarto volume in Latin, written by Francis Creuxines, a Jesuit, was published at Paris in 1664, and is entitled *Historicae Canadensis seu Novae Franciae Libri deceum ad annum usque Christi, MDCLVI.*

It states that a French Colony was established in the Onondaga territory about the year 1655; and it thus describes that highly fertile and uncommonly interesting country: *Ergo biduo post ingenti agmine deductus est ad locum gallorum sedi atque domicilio destinatum, leucas quator dissitum a pago, ubi primum pedem fixerat, bix quidquam a natura videre sit absolutius: ac si ars, ut in gallia, ceteraque Europa, accederet, haud temere certaret cum Baijs, Pratum est ingens cingit undique silva coedua ad ripam Lacus Gamentaae, quo Nationes quatuor, principes Iroquiae totius regionis tanquam ad centrum navigolis confluere perfaeile queant, et nude vicissim facillimus aditus sit ad errum singulas, per omnes lacusque circumfluentes. Ferinae copia certat cum copia piscium, atque ut ne desit quidquam, turtures eo undique subveris initium convolant, tanto numero, ut reti capi autur Piscium quidem, certe volante ut piscatores esse ferantur qui intra unius noctis spatium anguillas ad mille singuli, hamo capiant. Pratum intersecant fontes duo, centum prope passus alter ab altro dissiti: alterius aqua salsa salis optimi copium subministrat, alterius lympha dulcis ad potionem est; et quod mirere, uterque ex uno eudemque colle scaturit*". It appears from Charlevoix's history of New France that missionaries were sent to Onondaga in 1654; that a French colony was established there under the auspices of Le Sieur Dupuys in 1656, and retired in 1658; and that the missionaries abandoned the country in 1668. When LaSalle started from Canada and went down the Mississippi

in 1679, he discovered a large plain between the lake of the Hurons and that of the Illinois, in which was a fine settlement belonging to the Jesuits.

The traditions of the Indians agree in some measure with the French relations. They represent that their forefathers has several bloody battles with the French and finally compelled them to abandon the country; that the French, after being driven to their last fortress, capitulated and agreed to depart on being furnished with provisions; that the Indians filled their bags with ashes, covered with corn, and that the greater part of the French in consequence fell victims to famine at a place called by them *anse de famine* and by us, Hungry Hill. There is a hill in Pompey which the Indians will not visit, and which they call Bloody Hill.

It is surprising that no old Indian weapons, such as stone knives, axes and arrowheads, are found in this country*. It appears that they were superseded by French substitutes of iron.

The old fortifications were erected previous to European intercourse. The Indians are ignorant by whom they were made; and in the wars which took place in this country it is probable that they were occupied as strongholds by the belligerents; and it is likely that the ruins of European works of a different construction may be found in the same way that Roman and British fortifications are to be seen in the vicinity of each other in Great Britain. It is remarkable that our ancient forts resemble the old British and Danish. Pennant, in his *Tour in Scotland*, says: "On the hill, near a certain spot, is a circular British entrenchment, and I was told of others of a square form at a few miles' distance, I suppose Roman"—and in his *Tour* through Wales he describes "a strong British post on the summit of a hill in Wales, of a circular form, with a great foss (e) and dike and a small artificial mount within the precinct." How exactly does this correspond with our old

*"County" is evidently meant.

forts! The Danes as well as the nations which erected our fortifications, were in all probability of Scythian origin. According to Pliny, the name of Scythian was common to all the nations living in the north of Asia and Europe.

In the town of Camillus, in the same county of Onondaga, about four miles from the Seneca River, thirty miles from Lake Ontario, and eighteen from Salina, there are two ancient forts, on the land of Judge Munro, who has been settled there about nineteen years. One is on a very high hill, and its area covers about three acres. It had one eastern gate, and in the west there was another communicating with a spring about ten rods from the fort; its shape elliptical. The ditch was deep and the eastern wall ten feet high. In the centre was a large limestone of an irregular shape, which could be raised by two men; the bottom was flat and three feet long. It contained, in the opinion of Judge Munro, unknown characters plainly figured on the stone to the extent of eighteen inches in length and three inches in breadth. When I visited this place the stone was not to be seen, and my enquiries to find it were unsuccessful. I saw the stump of a black oak on the wall, one hundred years old; and about nineteen years ago there were *indicia* of two preceding growths. The second fort is almost half a mile distant, on lower ground, constructed like the other, and is about half as large. Near the large fort there are the marks of an old road, now covered by trees. I also saw in several places in this town, on high ground, considerable ridges stretching from the top to the bottom of the hills and the gullies between of no great width. This phenomenon occurs in very ancient settlements where the soil is loamy and the hills steep, and is occasioned by crevices produced and gradually enlarged by torrents. In a forest state this effect cannot result, and this evinces that those grounds were cleared in antient times. When settled by us they exhibited the same appearance as now, except being covered by wood; and as stumps are now to be seen in the gullies, the ridges

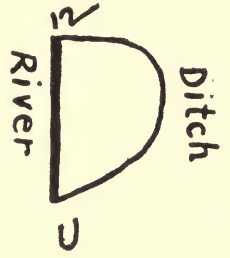
and intervening small ravines could not have been made by the last clearing. The first settlers observed shells of testaceous animals accumulated in great masses in different places, and numerous fragments of pottery. Judge Munro found, in digging the cellar of his house, several pieces of brick. In various places there were large spots of deep black mould, demonstrating the former existence of buildings and erections of different kinds; and Judge Munro, seeing the appearance of a well, viz: a hole ten feet deep and the earth considerably caved in, he dug three and a half feet deep and came to a parcel of flints, below which he found a great quantity of human bones, which pulverized on exposure to the air. This is strong evidence of the destruction of an ancient settlement. The disposal of the dead was unquestionably made by an invading enemy.

I also observed on Boughton's Hill, in Ontario county, where a bloody battle is said to have been fought, black spots of mould at irregular intervals, and yellow clay between. The most easterly fortification yet discovered in this region is about eighteen miles east of Manlius Square, with the exception of the one in Oxford, Chenango County, hereafter mentioned. To the north they have been discovered, as far as Sandy Creek, about fourteen miles from Sacket's Harbor; near that place there is one that covers fifty acres and that contains numerous fragments of pottery. To the west there are great numbers. There is a large one in the town of Onondaga, one in Scipio, two near Auburn, three near Canandaigua, and several between Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, there being three within a few miles of each other.

The fort before referred to as being in Oxford, is on the east bank of the Chenango River, in the centre of the present village, which is on both sides of the river. There is a piece of land containing between two and three acres, which is about thirty feet higher than the adjoining flat land around it. This rise of land

lies along the river bank about fifty rods, and at the southwesterly end this fort was situated. It contained about three roods of ground, and on the river the line was nearly straight and the bank almost perpendicular.

The figure was nearly like this:




At the places north and south, marked for gates, there were two spaces of about ten feet each where the ground has not been broken, which were undoubtedly the entrances or gateways by which the people of the fort went out and in, and particularly for water.

The curve, except the gateways, was a ditch regularly dug; and although the ground on which the fort was situated was, at the first white settlement, as heavily timbered as any other part of the forest, yet the lines of the work could be distinctly traced among the trees, and the distance from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the embankment, generally about four feet.

The antiquity of this fortification is more particularly evident from the following fact: There was one large pine tree or rather dead trunk, fifty or sixty feet high, which being cut, one hundred and ninety-five circles of the wood could be easily distinguished; and many more could not be counted, as the sap wood of the tree was principally gone. Probably this tree was three or four hundred years old; certainly more than two hundred. It might have stood one hundred years after it had completed its growth, and even longer. It is also uncertain how long a time elapsed from the

excavation of the ditch to the commencement of the growth of this tree. That it was not there when the earth was thrown up is certain; for it stood on the top of the bank, and its roots had shaped themselves to the ditch, running quite under the bottom of it; then rising on the other side near the surface of the earth, and then pursuing a horizontal direction. Probably this work was picketed in, but no remains of any wooden work have been discovered. The situation was very eligible, being healthy, commanding a beautiful prospect up and down the river, and there being no highland within such a distance that the garrison could be annoyed. No vestiges of any implements or utensils have been found, except some pieces of coarse pottery resembling stoneware, and roughly ornamented. The Indians have a tradition that the family of the Antones, which is supposed to belong to the Tuscarora nation, are the seventh generation from the inhabitants of this fort; but of its history they know nothing. There is also a place at Norwich, in the same county, on a high bank of the river, called the castle where the Indians lived at the period of our settling the country, and some vestiges of a fortification appear there, but it is in all probability of a much more modern date than the one at Oxford.

In the town of Ridgeway, in Genesee County, there have been discovered several ancient fortifications and burial places. About six miles from the Ridge road, and south of the great slope or mountain ridge, an old burying ground has been discovered within two or three months, in which are deposited bones of an unusual length and size. Over this ground lay the trunk of a chestnut tree, apparently four feet through at the stump. The top and limbs of this tree had entirely mouldered away by age. The bones lay across each other in a promiscuous manner; from which circumstance and the appearance of a fort in the neighbourhood, it is supposed that they were deposited there by their conquerors; and from the fort being situated in a swamp, it is believed it was the last resort of the vanquished, and probably the swamp was under water at the time.

There are extensive clearings in the Indian reservation at Buffalo, of which the Senecas can give no account. Their principal settlements were at a great distance to the east, until the sale of the greater part of their country since the conclusion of the Revolutionary War.

On the south side of Lake Erie there is a series of old fortifications running from the Cattaraugus Creek to the Pennsylvania line, a distance of fifty miles. Some are two, three and four miles apart, and some within half a mile. Some contain five acres. The walls or breastworks [are] of earth; and they are generally on ground where there are appearances of creeks having once emptied into the lakes; or where there was once a bay; so that it is inferred that these works were once on the margin of Lake Erie, which has now retreated from two to five miles northerly. Still further south, there is said to be another chain of forts running parallel with the former, and about the same distance from them as those are from the lake. The country here exhibits two different tables or sections of bottom, intervale or alluvial land; the one nearest the lake being the lower, and if I may so denominate it, the secondary table land; the primary or more elevated table land is bounded on the south by hills and valleys where Nature exhibits her usual aspects. The primary alluvial land was formed from the first retreat or recession of the lake, and then, it is supposed, the most southern line of fortifications was erected. In process of time the lake receded further to the north, leaving another section of table land, one which the other tier of works was made. The soil on the two flats is very different: the inferior being adapted for grass, and the superior for grain; and the timber varies in a correspondent (*sic*) manner. On the south side of Lake Ontario there are also two* alluvial formations; the most recent is north of the ridge road; no forts have been discovered on it. Whether there be any on the primary table land I have not learnt; south of the mountain ridge many have been observed.

*In the original "too."

In the geology of our country it is important to remark that the two alluvial formations before mentioned are, generally speaking, characteristic of all the lands bordering on the western waters; while on the eastern waters there is but one alluvial tract, with some few exceptions. This may be ascribed to the distance of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi from the ocean, their having prostrated, at two different periods, impediments or barriers, and in consequence of thus lowering the beds in which they flowed, having produced a partial exhaustion of the remote waters.

These distinct formations may be considered as great chronological landmarks. The non-existence of forts on the secondary or primary alluvial formations of Lake Ontario is a strong circumstance from which the remote antiquity of those on the highlands of the south may be deduced; because if they had been erected after the first or last retreat of the lake, they would undoubtedly have been made on them as most convenient and best adapted for all military, civil and domestic purposes.

The Iroquois formerly lived, according to their traditions, on the north side of the Lakes. When they immigrated to their present country, they extirpated the people who occupied it, and after the European settlement of America the confederates destroyed the Eries, or Cat Indians, who lived on the south side of Lake Erie, Whether the nations which possessed our western country before the Iroquois had erected those fortifications to protect them against their invaders, or whether they were made by anterior inhabitants, are mysteries which cannot be penetrated by human sagacity; nor can I pretend to decide whether the Eries or their predecessors raised the works of defence in their territory; but I am persuaded that enough has been said to demonstrate the existence of a vast population, settled in towns, defended by forts, cultivating agriculture, and more advanced in civilization than the nations which have inhabited the same countries since the European discovery.

*Albany*, October 7, 1817.